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'Raining in the Mountain' an epic Taiwanese film offered by the International Film Showcase

By Sophie Braccini



Photo provided

Three travelers start at dawn for a long journey on foot through a beautiful and mountainous Asian landscape. A man, the rich philanthropist Wen, his new concubine, and a male servant carrying their luggage live in the 15th century, during the Chinese Ming dynasty. Their destination is the Temple of Three Treasures, one of the most renowned Buddhist temples of the country.

The travelers are not seeking enlightenment; they have been invited by the aging abbot who is about to depart for his last voyage and is seeking advice to choose his successor. The abbot has also invited governor Wang, and the wise Master Wu Wai to give their opinion.

But some of the dignitaries invited are coming with ulterior motives. The monastery is the repository for the Mahayana sutras written by Xuan Zang, a priceless treasure; Wen and Wang would do about anything to get

their hands on this treasure. The arrival of Chiu Ming, a criminal who has paid to get his sentence commuted to becoming a monk starts disrupting the false peace of the monastery. The movie has all the elements to make it a great epic story with its villains, its good guys, and a secret treasure. Lies, treason, theft attempts and even murder escalate during the days that precede the induction ceremony.

The 1978 movie is a Taiwan/Hong Kong co-production made by King Hu, a Chinese-born director who lives in Hong Kong. This is the first time in its 10-year history that the International Film Showcase is presenting a classic movie. The film, available online, has been completely restored and is worth seeing on as big a screen as possible. The filming and the editing are flawless. The costumes, the natural decor, and the choreography are extremely beautiful.

The first scene of the three walkers at dawn, for example, is lyrical: women bathing in a spring, scenes in the forest, in the temple, across water, all have evocative and poetic qualities. The fight scenes include their share of kung fu and spectacular jumps, but it stays in the realm of human possibility and it is just sparingly interspersed. Group scenes with crowds of monks, intimate scenes with one or two people are just as well mastered and the overall rhythm is fast enough without being overwhelming.

King Hu, who wrote and directed the movie, said in an interview in the '70s that he wanted to study the struggles for power. "I do not know if power is a means or an end," he said. "I choose to set the movie in a Buddhist temple where the question of the essence of power can be questioned."

The spiritual undertone of the movie is discreet. There are a few Buddhist parables such as that of the pail of clear water, and of course the Abbot's final decision. But a similar story could have happened anywhere, in any place of power where a succession war rages. Although the story takes place in a monastery, women have an important role to play, including the beautiful White Fox played by Feng Hsu. King Hu often chose a heroine to be at the center of his stories. He is viewed with this film and others such as "A Touch of Zen" or "Dragon Inn" as a major actor of the revival of wuxia (martial heroes) fiction films.

Sun Yueh, who plays Wen, and Shih Chun, who plays the villain Hui Tung, are all very expressive actors, with sometimes almost a stage presence. The film has English subtitles but includes many scenes that are action-oriented, which makes following it very easy even for non-Mandarin speaking audiences.

The film is available to be rented online on the IFS website. Details can be found on the website links at <http://internationalshowcase.org/>. IFS founder Efi Lubliner recommends using a Chrome browser to access the site more easily.

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